

# Children's practices for handling relevance in whole-class interaction

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## Abstract

This article examines third-year primary school pupils' orientations to relevance, namely to the interconnectedness between their own and others' utterances/turns. Our aim is to shed light on *how* pupils handle relevance in its relation with the conversational coherence and the topic dealt with, within the sequential organization of plenary classroom interactions. Starting from an overview of studies that from multiple perspectives have been dedicated to these notions, we then present the interactional data collected and the empirical analysis carried out by adopting a conversational analysis approach. The study highlights the practices and resources utilized by pupils for three distinct types of action: 1) displaying relevance; 2) displaying the absence of relevance; 3) playing within the relevance frame. Specifically, the design and functions of metacommunicative turns through which children index the relevance of their contributions or account for its absence are examined, as well as their ability to construct playful actions within the relevance frame and sequential coherence, and the effects thereof.

Questo articolo esamina l'orientamento alla rilevanza/pertinenza discorsiva, ovvero all'interconnessione tra i propri turni di parola e quelli degli interlocutori, da parte di alunni del terzo anno della scuola primaria. Il nostro obiettivo è di far luce su *come* gli alunni gestiscono la pertinenza e l'intreccio tra questa, la coerenza conversazionale e il *topic*, nell'ambito dell'organizzazione sequenziale delle interazioni plenarie in classe. Partendo da una panoramica degli studi che, da molteplici prospettive, sono stati dedicati a questi concetti, presentiamo poi i dati interazionali raccolti e l'analisi empirica condotta adottando l'approccio dell'analisi conversazionale. Lo studio evidenzia le pratiche e le risorse messe in atto dagli alunni per tre tipi distinti di azione: 1) mostrare la rilevanza; 2) segnalare l'assenza di rilevanza; 3) giocare all'interno del quadro di rilevanza. In particolare, vengono esaminati la costruzione e le funzioni dei turni metacomunicativi attraverso i quali i bambini tematizzano la rilevanza nei loro contributi o ne spiegano l'assenza, nonché la capacità di costruire azioni ludiche, nel quadro della rilevanza e coerenza sequenziale, e gli effetti che questo genera.

**Keywords:** children's interactional competence; whole-classroom interaction; relevance; metacommunicative turns; playful actions

**Parole chiave:** competenza interazionale dei bambini; interazione nel gruppo-classe; rilevanza/pertinenza; turni metacomunicativi; azioni ludiche

## 1. Introduction

The development of the conversational competence needed to participate in interactions requires that speakers progressively master the cognitive and linguistic skills and socio-situational cognition that enables them to use language in a socially and culturally appropriate manner (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1979; Thompson, 1997; Matthews, 2014; Zufferey, 2015). On a conceptual level, this ability first refers to the cooperation principle underlying conversation (Grice, 1975) and is articulated in the four Gricean categories (quantity, quality, relation, manner). Among these is the maxim *be relevant*, which is intuitively clear in its meaning, but presents various challenges both for the speaker – if one considers the cognitive complexity and the sub-skills involved in being engaged in an interaction (Benoit, 1982) – and analysts, when it comes to dealing with the sequential and temporal dimension of a conversation taking place, for specific purposes, in natural interactional contexts. Succinctly, however, the development of conversational skills related to expectations of relevance can be conceptualized as the speaker's ability to monitor the course of the interaction, i.e., to take into account the sequential unfolding of activities and the interventions of one's interlocutors, as well as the ability to share and adapt the emergent common ground (Clark, 1996) characterizing relevance in interaction (Veneziano, 2018).

## 2. Relevance and coherence

In this article, we look at relevance from a conversational perspective, i.e., at its manifestations within naturally occurring interactions. However, since the subject has been studied from multiple perspectives, offering an overview of other approaches is helpful to better understand some meaningful differences, such as the distinction between relevance and coherence, as well as the concept of *topic*. Although *topic* is not a major construct in conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007), assuming it as an illustrative concept of speakers' orientation towards relevance and observing the resources they adopt in managing it are inevitable steps in an emic analysis, i.e., an analysis carried out from the interpretative perspective of the speakers themselves. Indeed, while constructing their verbal contributions, speakers often refer explicitly to the topic they are dealing with, by naming or indicating it, that is by opening meta-discursive parentheses in their turns.

Our research, as we shall see, highlights precisely how pupils, in the school age group under examination, also orient themselves meta-discursively towards the topic of discussion and its development during a plenary classroom interaction, for various interactional purposes. In this regard, we find helpful the distinction that views relevance as pertaining to the topic/subject of discussion (*referentially*), while treating coherence as referring to the level of conversational structure (*sociologically*), as stated by Keenan (1974, p. 16): “When we say that an utterance is relevant to some previous talk, we mean that the utterance is referentially or sociologically (as a kind of speech act) tied to the topic or direction of the talk”. As regards the analysis of our data, this also implies looking at to how consistent students are in terms of the sequential development of interaction, with respect to, for example, the type of action, turn-taking, points of interruption, etc., in the ongoing activities and the context.

Studies on relevance in interaction stemming from the pioneering work of Grice (1975) in the domain of philosophical pragmatics, subsequently found a wider elaboration in the field of cognitive pragmatics, leading to conceptual models of the inferential abilities involved in linguistic comprehension (Relevance theory, Sperber & Wilson, 1985). Conversational relevance and coherence as analytical objects have been approached from multiple perspectives and diverse methodologies in the fields of pragmatics and speech act theory (Givon, 1984; Attardo, 2000; Fraser, 2009), typological and textual linguistics (van Dijk, 1972; Reinhart, 1980), functional-

cognitive linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Werth, 1984) and as part of research programmes oriented towards the empirical description of speech-interaction (Keenan & Klein, 1975; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1983; Orletti, 1980; Tracy, 1984; Schiffrin, 1985; Schegloff, 1990).

Through a wide range of approaches, these studies have highlighted how interaction relies on the intentional, joint and collaborative nature of speakers' participation, and how a structural, social, linguistic and cognitive dimension, specific to discourse, towards which speakers are oriented in order to fulfill their joint activity, is recognizable. At the same time, these studies have shed light on the multiple interrelated layers through which participation in interactions gains its intersubjective character, that is, makes visible the interactional reciprocity that gives cohesion to the dynamics of action and interpretation within each communicative event. Against this backdrop, we will take into account studies that have provided empirical descriptions of the forms and resources adopted by speakers while constructing relevance/coherence in interaction, as well as the main results of studies on the development of interactional competence, viewed as a strong requirement to participate appropriately in interactions.

Conversational relevance has been conceptualized as the relationship between an utterance and the expectations it generates (Keenan & Klein, 1975; see also the notion of *conditional relevance* in Conversation Analysis, introduced in this Special Issue). This broad definition integrates formal, structural, and thematic dimensions of interaction (Benoit, 1982), thereby foregrounding the complexity of the resources mobilized in the construction of conversational relevance. It also delineates the analytical scope of this interactional property, which emerges “where the to-and-fro of social interaction takes place, [...] where minimally [...] two people are engaged in language as a form of joint action and are thus committed to a form of dynamic intersubjectivity, demanding mutual attention and accountability” (Enfield, 2022, p. 3). In relation to intersubjectivity, elements such as topic, sequential organization (as the structuring of action), and the context of the activity have likewise been evoked as key factors in accounting for conversational coherence.

In empirical research on relevance in interaction—including work adopting a developmental perspective—topic has recurrently been identified as a useful construct for describing and measuring the discursive resources mobilized by speakers, as well as their interactional competence in producing coherent contributions (Keenan, 1974; Keenan & Klein, 1975; Benoit, 1982; Bloom et al., 1982; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1983; Luszcz & Bacharach, 1983; Craig & Tracy, 1983; Tracy, 1984; Brinton & Fujiki, 1984; Orletti, 1989; Schley & Snow, 1992; Ninio & Snow, 1996; Abbot-Smith et al., 2023).

Ochs and Schieffelin's (1983) descriptive model, for example, differentiates between *continuous* and *discontinuous* discourse. Continuous discourse encompasses sequences in which the topic of the immediately preceding utterance is jointly maintained for two or more turns (*collaborating discourse topic*) and/or in which speakers introduce a new topic that is thematically connected to what has just emerged in the interaction (*incorporating discourse topic*). Discontinuous discourse, on the other hand, refers to speakers' actions that diverge from the topical trajectory of the immediately preceding utterance, either by re-opening a topic that has surfaced earlier in the interaction (*re-introducing topic*) or by initiating a topic unconnected to the ongoing activity (*introducing discourse topic*). Even at this early level of modelling, it becomes evident that attending to *degrees* of relevance is a more productive analytical strategy for understanding how participants, while co-constructing coherent interaction, orient to notions of local and/or global relevance (Tracy, 1984). This orientation enables speakers to establish relations of pertinence both with respect to the unfolding dynamics of the interaction at each turn and to the overarching thematic organization that structures the conversation at a given moment.

Despite its widespread use in studies of interaction, the concept of *topic* remains, in several respects, elusive. There is no broad consensus regarding its unambiguous definition or its analytic value in illuminating the intersubjective infrastructure that underlies conversational coherence. Topic development is, indeed, a highly

complex phenomenon, insofar as it intersects with other organizational systems of conversation, such as turn-taking and sequential order. Particularly relevant for empirically oriented disciplines—especially Conversation Analysis (CA)—topic is investigated in conjunction with the structural organization of talk-in-interaction (Jefferson, 1984). Accordingly, scholarly attention has focused both on the boundaries of topical talk (*bounded movements*), treated as salient moments within conversational architecture—specifically, as sequential environments (Maynard, 1980)—and on the linguistic resources through which topical sequences are opened or closed (Button & Casey, 1984, 1985; Holt & Drew, 2005), as well as on how topic is managed across the sequential unfolding of talk (*topic shading*; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

In line with CA's analytic principle—namely, that analysis should be oriented to what participants *are doing* by talking, rather than to the propositional content of what they *are talking about*—and in recognition of the non-convergence of propositional meaning and relational import in turns at talk (see, for this paper's purposes, the phenomenon of formulation: Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Heritage, 1985), Schegloff (1990) identifies significant limits to conceptualizing topic as an organizational unit of interaction, specifically in relation to temporality and sequentiality. For Schegloff, sequential organization constitutes the primary resource for achieving conversational coherence, since “in real talk-in-interaction, coherence and topic must in the first instance be constructed into the talk and progressively realised, not found” (Schegloff, 1990, p. 54).

An empirical investigation of conversational relevance or coherence in naturally occurring interaction therefore requires attention to temporality at least three levels: (i) the temporality of actions-in-progress, understood in their processual dimension; (ii) the contextual and activity-specific temporalities that shape participation frameworks (e.g., the turn-taking system in a classroom); and (iii) the temporality of transcription as an analytic representation that reconstructs, turn by turn, the unfolding of topical trajectories.

A review of empirical studies on the joint construction of conversational relevance and coherence demonstrates that participants treat coherence as a programmatic property of speech interaction and of its sequential organization. Far from functioning merely as a theoretical construct for analyzing the coherence and cohesion of utterances or texts, topic emerges both as a resource that guides participants' orientations and as an interactional achievement realized by speakers through their deployment of cognitive, social, and communicative competencies (Orletti, 1989; Fraser, 2009). This interactional achievement is particularly visible in the accountable nature of speakers' actions. As Garfinkel and Sacks (1970, p. 355) observe, “our conversational activities are accountably rational”—that is, speakers orient to topic as both a linguistic and a social ordering device, while also to the indexical character of all social actions and the reflexive relationship between action and its interpretation.

Empirical evidence of this orientation includes phenomena such as *disclaimers* (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975), *paraphrastic sequences* (Mazeland, 2007), *formulations* (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Heritage & Watson, 1979, 1980), certain types of *pre-sequences* (Schegloff, 2007), and, more in general, the forms and functions of the meta-talk specifically related to the interactional structure or its content (Shiffrin, 1980; Szczepek Reed, 2017; Küttner & Raymond, 2022) and to participants' accounts, such as the introduction of a new discursive topic (Orletti, 1989). These phenomena function as “means by which actors ‘take account’ of culture” (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975, p. 11) and manifest participants' interactional—specifically, metapragmatic—awareness of interactional competences and of context-sensitive forms that emerge from, and are occasioned by, specific socio-situational environments.

### 3. Data and methodology

The present study draws on a corpus of 60 hours of videorecorded lessons collected in 2024-2025 in three third-grade classes (i.e., with pupils aged 8-9 years old) in three different primary schools located in a medium-sized

city in the north of Italy. The recordings comprise five days (4 hours a day) for each of the three classes, and involve around 60 pupils and their three main teachers. The teachers mainly adopted teacher-led methods of instruction and forms of classroom management. For most of their lesson time, pupils were seated in parallel rows, with the teacher facing the class. Data was collected through various recording devices (three fixed video-cameras, a directional microphone, a small microphone placed on a desk), which allowed the researchers to document both teacher-pupils and children's peer interactions. Data collection was preliminarily approved by the University Ethics Committee and participants' consent was obtained according to the Italian and European laws regulating the handling of personal and sensitive data. For the sake of anonymity, all the names in the transcriptions are pseudonyms.

The analytic method used is Conversation Analysis (hereafter CA). The analysis proceeded inductively. The data was repeatedly observed with a particular attention to the resources and practices deployed by pupils to make their contributions relevant and coherent to the ongoing activity, as well as to their specific purposes. Through this scrutiny, it became evident that pupils were pervasively oriented towards 'being relevant' with their contributions, namely towards expectations of relevance in the interactional context. The detailed analyses of transcripts illustrated in the Section 4 aim to highlight precisely *how* these expectations are dealt with, managed, negotiated, evaluated or exploited by pupils, by means of discursive resources (e.g., metacommunicative formulations) and non-verbal behavior (e.g., gesture, smile), with which they display that they are engaged in relevance work, while taking turns and carrying out specific actions, i.e.:

- i. structuring their contribution by thematically addressing its relevance and projecting it as a longer turn, which guides listeners' understanding towards its components;
- ii. suspending the expectation of relevance to the current topic through a momentary detour explicitly marked as such and accounted for with individual reasons (a question to be asked, a personal story to respond to another story);
- iii. abiding by the rules of relevance, while performing a playful social action.

We have characterized these main and recurrent pupils' practices in handling relevance respectively as: i.) Displaying relevance, ii.) Displaying lack of relevance, and iii.) Playing with the relevance frame (in the sense just mentioned, which will be clarified below). Collections of extracts for each practice were created, specifically: 10 extracts beginning with or including metadiscursive turns and 8 extracts of turns/actions which are partly heterogeneous within them, but linked by wordplays or similar poetic devices to create some comical or expressive effects. These extracts were fully transcribed according to CA conventions (Sacks et al., 1974; Jefferson, 2004). Preliminary analyses of the sequences were discussed in several data sessions with other researchers who are experts in CA. The four excerpts from the collection that will be presented below, are emblematic instances of each of the resources whereby children demonstrated their orientation toward the importance of being relevant.

#### 4. Analysis

This section illustrates three practices whereby the pupils in our data demonstrate that they are engaged in contributing relevantly and in coherent ways to the classroom discourse, that is: i.) Displaying relevance, ii.) Displaying lack of relevance, and iii.) Playing within the relevance frame. Each subsection is dedicated to illustrating and analyzing one of these specific practices.

#### 4.1 Displaying relevance

Example 1 shows how a pupil (EMA) displays the relevance of his upcoming turn by specifying that it is linked to another pupil's (ASI's) previous turn. The pupils have just watched the music video of a song they are learning for the upcoming school party. The video depicted several war scenes, focusing especially on children in war contexts. After watching the video, the teacher (TEA) asks the whole class what they observed, thus opening a free discussion<sup>1</sup>. Just before the interaction reported in Ex.1, while the class was talking about other wars in the world, among which those between Israel and Palestine, and between Russia and Ukraine, ASI mentioned the topic of orphanages through the teacher-addressed question ("But do the orphanages still exist?") which was not strictly related to the ongoing dialogue. TEA replies that they no longer exist in Italy, but they do exist in other places (see lines 1-3, below). EMA has been raising his hand for a while:

##### Ex. 1 – "It's a bit connected"

- 1 TEA ↑però in altri po:sti invece ↓come: in Ru:ssia nei paesi  
yet in other places instead like in Russia in countries
- 2 molto:: >e:↑:h< ci sono ancora gli orfano°tro:fi°  
very ehm there are still the orphanages.
- 3 (0.4)
- 4 dove non hanno un'organizzazione sociale come ^la ↓nos:tra.  
where they don't have a social organization like ours ^points toward Ema
- 5 ADE °mi[o no-°  
my grandp-
- 6 TEA [^e:: c'era Ema però  
but there was Ema  
^points toward EMA
- 7 (1.0) ((EMA lowers his hand))
- 8 → EMA vorrei dire due co:se. (0.7) la prima, (0.7) è un po' collegata  
I'd like to say two things. the first one is a bit connected
- 9 a quella di asia.  
to Asia's
- 10 (.)
- 11 TEA mh
- 12 (1.4)
- 13 EMA comunque:, (.) °em:h m:h° (.) quando c'era la guerra Serbia Leone e  
anyway ehm when there was the Serbia Leone war and
- 14 qualcos'a:ltro, c'[e:rano] gli orfano>°trofi°<  
something else there were the orphanages
- 15 TEA [°Serbia.°]  
Serbia
- 16 <S::E:RR:A.>  
Serra
- 17 (0.5)
- 18 TEA la [Serra]  
the Serra
- 19 EMA [Serra]  
Serra
- 20 (0.5)



21 Leone.  
Leone

22 (0.8)

23 TEA la Si:r::ia:, (.) è un'altra cosa, 'tenzione. >tutti paesi che  
Syria is another thing beware all countries that

24 sono stati in guerra<, (.) però stai mescolando i nomi.  
have been fighting wars but you're mixing the names

25 (1.6) ((a student coughs; tea keeps looking at ema))

26 EMA poi la seconda è che non:-non C'È solo un s:- c'è un'altra guerra=  
then the second (thing) is that there's not just one- there's another war

27 TEA =euh:: (.) ce ne sono,  
indeed there are many

28 (.)

29 EMA c'è anche Li::°ba:no:°  
there's also the Lebanon

30 TEA Il?  
the?

31 AA Libano  
Lebanon

32 TEA il Li::bano, il Libano è sempre coinvolto adesso, (.) in questa  
Lebanon Lebanon is also involved now in this

33 guerra con Israele.=un altro paese che è stato tirato dentro  
war with Israel another country that has been involved in

34 nel[la guerra  
the war

35 ENR [anche l'Iran!  
Iran too

36 TEA l'Ira:n che è lì vicino >>bisogna stare attenti<< PERÒ RAGA:ZZI  
Iran which is very close you need to be careful but guys

37 adesso voglio- >perché altrimenti-< (.) rimanere un po' sulla-  
now I want to- because otherwise- remain a bit on

38 canzo:ne.  
song

The end of TEA's turn (line 4) is conveyed multimodally through both the final intonation and a pointing gesture (line 4), whereby TEA selects EMA as the next speaker. At this point, and despite TEA's multimodal next-speaker selection, ADE takes the turn (line 5), probably viewing TEA's pointing as directed toward herself, as she is sitting next to EMA. In overlap with her, TEA signals that EMA had raised his hand first ("but there was Ema", line 6). At the same time, TEA points again toward EMA (line 6), further constructing him as the legitimate, selected next speaker. Consistently with TEA's turn, ADE self-interrupts (line 5), then EMA lowers his hand (line 7) and starts talking (from line 8).

For a better understanding of the ensuing detailed analysis of EMA's turns, some other floor-related details temporally preceding them must be mentioned, so as to capture their sequential implications for EMA's current intervention. In fact, EMA who now is getting his floor, had already made an attempt to get it (97 lines earlier), by producing the initiation of a turn ("but there isn't") when TEA had just named the conflict between Russia and Ukraine to remind the children of the number of contemporary active conflicts in the world. He had been inevitably interrupted by TEA ("oh, sorry, there was Elia and then there was Henry"), as other two classmates had already bid for the floor, which positioned him as the third one in terms of turn allocation as he himself



points out (“and then me”) in a collaborative completion of the teacher’s turn. In this light, it is important to highlight the structure of EMA’s turn (lines 8-9) as it shows how he is handling expectations related to being relevant in his own contribution. It emerges, in particular, that he is orienting towards a hierarchy of information based on the temporal salience that the contributions of his classmates have gained during the course of the interaction (Ochs & Schiefflin, 1983). Indeed, unlike most turns by pupils in our data (see for example ADE’s turn in line 5), EMA’s turn is opened by a metacommunicative preface (“I’d like to say two things”, line 8; see Kuttner & Raymond, 2022), which serves a double function. First, it anticipates the bipartite structure of EMA’s upcoming speech, thus guiding hearers’ comprehension; second, it signals that EMA will hold the floor for longer than usual, having, in fact, to deal with two points. After this preface and a brief pause, EMA starts discussing “the first one,” (line 8). Yet, before actually mentioning it, he adds a further preface, whereby he presents the upcoming information as “a bit connected” with Asia’s previous turn (lines 8-9). Through this additional preface, EMA marks the relevance of his turn, explicitly framing it as linked – although only “a bit” – with the class discourse until then, particularly with Asia’s turn. In other words, this preface relates EMA’s subsequent talk to preceding talk from a co-participant which he has kept track of, and, as such, displays EMA’s orientation toward being relevant to and coherent with the ongoing class interaction.

TEA responds to EMA’s multiple prefaces through a minimum continuer (“mh”, line 11), by means of which she “display[s her] understanding that an extended turn at talk is in progress but not yet complete” (Goodwin, 1986, p. 207) and invites the pupil to continue talking, which EMA does after a brief pause (line 12). After the initial topic orientation marker (“anyway”, “comunque”, see Fraser, 2009), EMA finally mentions the first issue in his agenda: specifically, he adds that during the “the Serbia Leone war” (line 13) orphanages existed. This contribution is topically coherent with Asia’s previous comment about orphanages and appears to negotiate the relevance of the question asked by his classmate (as *anyway* and hesitation tokens suggest; line 13). This further shows EMA’s interactive competence and, particularly, his ability to contribute in ways that are relevant to the ongoing classroom interaction. After this turn, TEA issues two corrections of EMA’s words. First, she corrects EMA’s “Serbia Leone” (line 13) with “Serra Leone” (lines 15-16 and 18 – the correct version would actually be “Sierra Leone”). This correction is immediately followed by EMA’s uptake: the pupil repeats the ‘correct’ version, thus showing his understanding. Then, TEA further corrects EMA by specifying that the Syrian war context is “another thing” (line 23) and warning him not to “mix the names” of different war-torn countries (lines 23-24). After this correction and a brief silence (line 25), EMA takes the floor again (line 26), consistently with TEA’s tacit selection of him as the next speaker (see TEA’s gaze direction, line 25). The pupil now refers to the “second thing” (line 26), as he previously announced (see line 8), adding that many wars are going on at the same time. This contribution, soon confirmed and even emphasized by TEA (“indeed there are many”, line 27), is now shaped as a restart – as also shown by the same wording (“*there isn’t just one*”, line 26) – of what he had tried to say much earlier when EMA had first raised his hand, but was interrupted due to the temporal organization of talk in the ongoing activity, a setting where turns are typically subject to competition.

#### 4.2 Displaying lack of relevance

After observing, in Excerpt 1, how EMA makes recourse to a metacommunicative turn at the beginning of his contribution to exhibit a discursive structure oriented towards the principle of relevance with respect to the development of the interaction, we will now analyze two excerpts in which pupils make use of the same resource – a metacommunicative turn – to signal, instead, a temporary shift from the current discursive activity. Despite the apparent similarity between the two extracts that will be presented below, this resource now takes on different forms (position in the turn) and fulfills different functions (action performed). Excerpt 2 is taken from an

Italian language lesson. TEA is guiding the students in understanding the function of the predicate within the sentence and, in doing so, establishes an analogy between the predicate and the liturgical sermon. However, this teacher's discursive choice ends up requiring an additional explanation, since TEA find herself discussing with pupils about the fact that some of them are unfamiliar with the context and meaning of preaching in Catholic liturgy. Given these emergent limitations of the illustrative value of the analogy just proposed, TEA continues by going back to the grammatical explanation (line 1):

Ex. 2 - "Something that has nothing to do with this, but"

1 TEA qu<sup>↑</sup>indi si chiama pre:di:ca:to (.) perché il verbo appunto, ci, (.)  
so it is called predicate because the verb indeed,  
2 ra:cco:nta qualcosa del? s- (0.5) del?  
tells us something about? s- about?  
3 ENR >soggetto<  
subject  
4 AA sog[ge:tto  
subject  
5 TEA [del soggetto. molto bene.  
about the subject. very well.  
6 SOF ma predi[cato si trova sul dizionario?  
but predicate is it in the dictionary?  
7 TEA [e poi ci so:no,  
and then there are  
8 TEA eh?  
eh?  
9 SOF su- sul dizionario si trova predicato?  
in- in the dictionary is there predicate?  
10 (1.2)  
11 TEA la parola predicato<sup>^</sup> per vedere? predica:re predicato. sì  
the word predicate to look for it? to preach predicate. yes  
SOF <sup>^</sup>nods  
12 TEA dopo magari lo vai a vedere. così andiamo a vedere proprio \*cosa vuol dire.  
afterwards maybe you'll look up it. so we'll see what it really means.  
13 ENR \*raises his hand  
14 ENR [maes-  
teach-  
15 TEA [tu Alina mi stai seguendo? (.) oltre a giochicchiare co:[n:,  
Alina are you following me? besides playing with,  
16 ENR [maestra,  
teacher  
17 TEA ((turns face towards Enr and nods))  
18 → ENR una cosa che non c'entra con questa cosa qui ma (0.9) ma nel  
one thing that has nothing to do with this but but  
19 dizionario c'è scritto dizionario?  
Is dictionary written in the dictionary?  
20 (0.3)  
21 TEA ((laugh)) [cert<sup>↑</sup>o, (0.7)  
of course  
22 AA [((laugh))

23 TEA che nel dizionario [c'è >SCRITTO DIZIONARIO PERCHÉ<=  
in the dictionary is written dictionary because

24 SOF [oppure c'è scritto vocabolario  
or it is written vocabulary

25 TEA =<dizionario>, (0.5) [è un:  
dictionary is a

26 EMA [è una parola  
is a word

27 TEA cos'è dizionario?  
what is dictionary?

28 CAR è un nome.  
it's a name.

29 TEA un nome, della lingua italiana. perché io con la parola ^dizionario  
a name of the italian language. because I with the word dictionary

30 indico quella cosa là.  
i point to that thing over there.

^pointing in the

direction of the class dictionary

31 (1.1)

32 TEA e quindi dentro nel dizionario trovi la parola dizionario.  
and so inside the dictionary you find the word dictionary.

33 (0.8)

34 TEA okei Henri?  
okei Henri?

35 ENR ((nods))

36 TEA bene.  
good.

TEA is now engaged in verifying pupils' knowledge as well (lines 1-5). However, SOF (line 6) occasions a momentary suspension, which is sequentially linked to the TEA's initiative to offer an explanation of the term "predicate" by means of analogy. By opening her turn with "but", indeed, SOF moves the conversation back to an earlier moment (Fasulo, 2009), and offers, in the form of a request for information, what appears to be an alternative (dictionary *vs.* analogy) to TEA's previous initiative. After a sequence of clarification (lines 8-9), TEA first partially reformulates SOF's question (line 11) to verify her correct understanding, and then completes the adjacency pair. It is interesting to observe how TEA, here, first displays what appears to be a lexical 'aloud' reflection, almost a useful individual strategy for reconstructing the lemma, and then reports the result, "yes". TEA's initial reformulation of SOF's question ("but predicate."), in a complete explicit form ("the word predicate") and what follows ("afterwards, maybe you'll look up it..."), make clear that TEA is interpreting the pupil's turn as a request for information (line 6), linked to the activity of explaining the grammatical term and motivated by a practical purpose. It is also interesting to notice, in line 12, how the 2nd person singular ("you go and see it") shifts into the 1st person plural ("we'll see what it really means"), while constructing the sequence of events projected by TEA's turn, that is to say the transition from SOF's personal question to the collective interest (of the whole class), thus attributing pertinence to the pupil's intervention.

At this point, ENR bids for the floor, by first raising his hand and then calling TEA (lines 14 and then 17). Turning her gaze towards ENR and making a gesture of assent, TEA gives the floor to the pupil (line 18). ENR's turn consists of a preface and a question addressed to TEA. It is worth noticing here how ENR is oriented towards the principle of conversational relevance and what resources he adopts to exhibit this orientation, as well as the coherence that his turn gains in relation to the sequential environment in which it is produced. ENR's

question, in fact, follows closely the previous temporary suspension of activity initiated by SOF (line 6) and mirrors the prior question asked by her classmate, both in terms of format (“but” at the beginning of the turn) and content (a request for information regarding the presence of a term in the dictionary). However, although similar in their format, the turns by the two pupils differ in terms of their relevance to the talk previously unfolded in the class. Whereas SOF’s action was linked to the explanation of the term *predicate*, ENR’s action makes public a personal question (curiosity?), by addressing it to TEA. For this reason, ENR introduces his question by means of a metacommunicative preface (Küttner & Raymond, 2022) that informs his interlocutor in advance on how to interpret and eventually evaluate his turn (Hewitt & Stoke, 1975). This evaluative aspect (Schiffrin, 1980) refers precisely to the degree of relevance displayed by his contribution to what is currently being discussed. In this preliminary action on the part of ENR, we can see how he is very much orientated towards the expectations of relevance in the other speakers’ contributions, which accounts for his need to signal its possible absence. But in doing so, ENR also shows an orientation towards the interactional order of the classroom and the roles of its participants, as the preface and the pause (0.9 seconds) preceding the completion of the turn carve out a space for consent or denial addressed to TEA as the authority responsible for assessing whether or not to grant the floor and allow the activity to be suspended.

While continuing, the dialogue shows, not unlike from what we have seen in the exchange between TEA and SOF (lines 12-13), how, in the context of classroom interactions, the relevance of the speakers’ contributions, i.e., their pertinence and informativeness with respect to the activity in which they are involved, rather than being a property of individual utterances, is an eminently interactional and negotiable issue. TEA, in fact, exploits the space of completion of the question-answer pair to open an activity addressed, now, at the whole class, which is being solicited to go on reflecting on language aspects: the grammatical analysis of the elements under consideration (line 26) and the relationship between name and referent (lines 30 and 31). Thus, the momentary suspension due to ENR’s question is brought back to the teaching activity in progress. It should be noted that, despite ENR’s admission of a lack of relevance to the locally immediate interactional environment, his question (curiosity?) reveals a great deal about how metalinguistic work—e.g. explaining the meaning of words – can increase metalinguistic awareness in pupils, as SOF’s turn (line 24) also demonstrates. Interestingly, the conversational relevance issue highlights significant aspects of a specifically didactic nature, viewed from a teacher’s perspective.

### Ex. 3 – “But, that is not what this is about”

The third excerpt is taken from the same free discussion activity as in the first one. The discussion has just begun when TEA notices that a pupil (MEL) is crying discreetly. She approaches her and tries to give comfort, by asking the reason for her state of mind. The interaction between TEA and MEL extends over several turns and it is embedded in the ongoing whole-group discussion about the video the pupils have just watched (see also the immediate context of excerpt 1), a discussion that started from sharing their interpretations of the video itself and then expanded to focus on the wars currently taking place.

While still focusing on whether and how pupils contribute in a relevant and meaningful way to the ongoing exchange they are engaged in, for an adequate account of this excerpt it is necessary to consider certain spatial and temporal elements, so as to keep track of both the local and global development of the discussion. To this end, the transcript includes lines 1-20, which show the moment when the discussion is suspended and TEA reaches out to MEL at her desk to console her. Although not examined in depth, this segment allows us to observe both the verbal and non-verbal activity of some participants preceding the interaction in Excerpt 3, and

the arrangement in the classroom space (Fig. 1), that is their proximity during the interaction shown in the subsequent transcript:

- 1 TEA ^\*mi dici Melia che cosa ti ha [fatto \*piangere?]  
can you tell me Melia what made you cry?  
EVY ^raises her hand  
SOF ^raises her hand \*lowers her hand
- 2 ELI [di solito però,]  
usually however
- 3 TEA un attimo:!  
just a moment!
- 4 TEA Melia mi dici cosa ti ha fatto piangere?  
Melia can you tell me what made you cry?
- 5 (2.1)
- 6 TEA tesoro,  
darling
- 7 (2.0)
- 8 TEA ti ha emozionato o ti ha fatto venire in mente qualcosa?  
did it move you or bring something to mind?
- 9 MEL °mi ha fatto venire in mente qualcosa° ((tearful voice))  
it reminded me of something
- 10 TEA non vuoi condividere con noi ^questa grande tristezza che hai?  
don't you want to share this great sadness you feel with us?  
^moves towards Mel
- 11 (3.2)
- 12 TEA eh?  
eh?
- 13 (2.9)
- 14 TEA sono morti dei tuoi parenti ^in \*guerra?  
did any of your relatives die in the war?  
^caresses Mel's head  
\*nods  
MEL
- 15 TEA chi è che è morto in guerra teso-, ma [in quali guerre?]  
who died in the war? darl-, but in which wars?
- 16 MEL [°mio nonno°]  
my grandfather
- 17 TEA ^eh?  
eh?  
^hold her hand on Mel's head
- 18 MEL °il nonno°  
grandfather
- 19 TEA il nonno?  
grandfather?
- 20 MEL ((nods))



Fig. 1

((52 lines omitted))

- 73 AA ((loud voices))
- 74 TEA OHI.  
hey.
- 75 (0.6)
- 76 AA [((loud voices))
- 77 TEA [scusa:te  
excuse me
- 78 TEA scusa:te c'era Evy con la mano alzata che ASPETTAVA LA PAROLA pazientem[ente.  
79 excuse me Evyra was there with her hand raised waiting patiently  
to speak.
- 80 ELI [ma stav- stavo fin[endo  
but I wa- I was finishing
- 81 TEA [Eli:s (.) si però lei aveva alzato la  
Elis yes but she raised
- 82 mano ^prima.  
her hand first
- ELI ^raises his hand
- 83 TEA ((nods towards Evy))
- 84 (2.0)
- 85 EVY da i miei nonni:, (.) cioè duran- d- ci dovevano nascere cinque cani  
at my grandparents, that is durin- d- five dogs were to be born
- 86 ma invece ne sono nati quattro, perché uno è morto durante il  
but instead four of them were born, because one died during
- 87 → par°to° il parto. Però non si tratta di questo.=  
the delivery the delivery. but that's not what this is about.
- 88 TEA =[non si tratta- e] poi non si tratta di gue:rra.  
It's not about- and then it's not about war.
- 89 ADE [che cos'è il parto?]  
what is delivery?
- 90 TEA quelle purtroppo [sono cose che succedono.]  
unfortunately those are things that happen.
- 91 ENR [non sai cos'è il °parto°]  
you don't know what delivery is?
- 92 TEA brutte, che ci fanno (.) venire tristezza però, (0.5) allora scusami  
bad things, which make us sad but, well sorry
- 93 c'era Elis, poi c'era Henry,  
there was Elis, then there was Henry

In the class, some pupils who have been engaged in the discussion are now speaking freely. They have not bid for the floor and are yelling, instead, among themselves (line 73). TEA relies, in a loud volume, on the Italian interjection *OHI* (roughly translatable in English as *HEY*), a very colloquial form, whose function here could be to establish silence, get the pupils' attention and restore order. However, this “subtle interactional work” (Dingemanse, 2020, p. 188) on the part of the teacher does not have the expected effect. She has to resort to – and repeat – a full word (lines 77-78), a verbal form functioning as a discourse marker to re-establish, or rather, share again the “raising your hands rule”, which she does by referring (line 78) to EVY's behaviour, who had her hand raised at that precise moment, after remaining in this position for a while (we see EVY raising her hand at line 1, then she lowers it at line 28, and raises it again at line 36, still waiting for the floor). ELI's complaint, at



line 80, leads the teacher to explain that she draws on the temporal order of requests for speaking, which legitimizes EVY's priority in the allocation of her turn. This TEA's "authoritarian" gesture in interrupting ELI, and her turns (lines 78 and 81) up to that moment, seem, indeed, aimed not only at restoring the classroom order and at reiterating, once again, the speaking rules, but –perhaps first and foremost – at closing the digression that had momentarily disrupted the discussion on the video just seen, which now, indeed, is given priority again. ELI aligns himself by raising his hand and waiting for his turn (line 82), while TEA gives the floor to EVY with a nod of head (line 83).

EVY finally takes the floor. We can identify some thematic elements in EVY's turn, concerning namely the 'grandfather' and the 'experience of death', that can be traced back to what had previously emerged, especially from the interaction between TEA and MEL. Above all, however, there is an alignment in the type of action carried out by EVY: at a moment when the discussion has become personal, EVY's response seems aimed at aligning perspectives, now offering a second story (Sacks, 1992) of a personal experience. However, these elements do not seem sufficient to give relevance to EVY's contribution, an absence that EVY herself makes explicit by means of a post-positioned meta-discursive turn to her contribution: "but that's not what this is about" (line 87). The action conveyed by this post-positioned meta-discursive turn is interpretable as a "pre-emptive self-repair" or "precautionary repair", expressly oriented towards the interlocutor's expectations of relevance and pertinence, of which EVY demonstrates her awareness. The specific position of the meta-turn, while closing the turn that it is intended to support, generates an interruption in the sequential development of the exchange (Mazeland, 2007), which is made visible by the reformulation in TEA's reply (line 88). In this reformulation, the first attempt ('it's not about-'), latched to EVY's meta-turn, seems to be affected by the anticipatory character of this kind of "precautionary repair". This gives an echoic aspect to TEA's comment, which she immediately rephrases by adding a thematic referent ("it's not about war") that highlights the unrelated nature of the pupil's story.

The function of the metacommunicative resource used by EVY recalls what has been observed for the interactional phenomenon of disclaimers (Hewitt & Stoke, 1975), a type of account through which "actors explicitly define the relation between their questionable conduct and prevailing norms" (Hewitt & Stoke, 1975, p. 11). While emphasizing a departure from the topic, also evident in the interactional shift of demonstratives "this" (EVY, line 87) and "those" (TEA, line 90), TEA participates in the construction of the account, offering details relevant to both contributions, that of MEL (lines 15-18) and that of EVY: "bad things, which make us sad" (line 92), thus offering a sufficiently broad framework of meaning to bring the pupil's contribution closer to the overall theme of the discussion.

### 4.3 *Playing within the relevance frame*

The fourth excerpt illustrates how pupils' orientation toward relevance can be combined with a verbal play, by incorporating it in the sequential organization itself that gives coherence to the conversation. While this is not surprising, given that any interactional context can be the locus of a wordplay occasioned by the linguistic features of what participants say (Rodgers & Fasulo, 2022), it is worth looking closely at the dynamics that led to this occurrence of this phenomenon, during an Italian language lesson.

Pupils are working on the nominal derivation and TEA has just summarized the general rule according to which the meaning of a word can change by means of prefixes and suffixes:

Ex. 4 – "libreria, gelateria, tunisia"

1 (3.0)



2 TEA conoscete altre parole che finiscono per eria come libreria,  
do you know other words that end in eria such as libreria

3 YO ((raises his hand))

4 ABD pi^zzeria  
pizzeria  
GIN ^raises her hand

5 TEA pizzeri:a:! ((pointing at Yo))  
pizzeria!

6 YO pescheria^  
fish market  
GIN ^lowers her hand

7 TEA pescheri:a:  
fish market

8 (0.7)

9 TEA [°vedete°  
you see

10 GIN [panetteria  
bakery

11 TEA pane>tteria<. soprattu[tto,  
bakery mainly

12 ABD [gelateria  
gelateria (ice cream shop)

13 (0.5)

14 TEA negozi: (.) dove si vende qualcosa. vero?  
shops where one sells something, right?

15 (2.8)

16 → FIL Tunisia ((gesture with palms facing upwards, smiling and nodding)) Fig. 2  
Tunisia

17 (1.0)

18 ANN ma cosa c'è:ntra!  
but what does that have to do with it!

19 FIL [beh  
well

20 TEA [non c'entra assolutamente niente.  
it has absolutely nothing to do with it

21 (1.4)

22 FIL ((with a sad expression, turns his head sx towards Yo)) Fig. 3

23 TEA Filiberto eria^ è uguale a tunisia?  
Filiberto eria is it the same as tunisia?  
^turns his gaze towards TEA and smiles Fig. 4

24 FIL ^n:o::\*  
no

YO ^looks down at his notebook and smiles  
\*smiles Fig. 5

25 TEA eh non è uguale.  
eh it's not the same.

26 YO tunesi::a  
tunesia

27 TEA non spriamo la prima cosa che ci viene nella testa.

let's not blurt out the first thing that comes us to mind.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

By addressing an open question to the class as a whole group (line 2), TEA sets up the pupils' task of identifying examples of lexical occurrences ending with the suffix *-eria*. The sequence unfolds in the typical IRE format (lines 3-8), in a rather rhythmic way, given the pupils' readiness in responding with a one-word utterance, and the subsequent acceptance of the latter by TEA, who simultaneously monitors those who raise their hands and gives them the floor. A brief pause (0.7 sec., line 8) provides TEA with the opportunity to close the sequence by pointing out the regularity (*you see... mainly shops*) detectable in the examples. This action takes a few turns (lines 9, 11 and 14), in overlap with those by GIB and ABD who are engaged in stretching the list of examples (in continuing the game?). A substantial pause (2.8 seconds) then seems to confirm a collective understanding and hence the end of the activity, but FIL reopens the sequence with a contribution that differs from those previously emerged.

Constructed on a partial similarity of the sound *ia* with the final slot (*-eria*) of the several words listed and listened up to that point, FIL's word choice (*Tunisia*, line 16) deviates both from the participatory rule made explicit at the beginning of the sequence (ie., producing an item containing that suffix, line 2), and from the general semantic rule just conveyed by TEA (*mainly shops where something is sold*, line 14). FIL's action emerges as a (delayed) post-expansion (Schegloff, 2007) of the preceding sequence, with which he is now negotiating the second-pair part by TEA, in a move towards ordinary expectations of conversational relevance and coherence with what has just occurred, but his contribution is knowingly built on an incorrect answer. Although he is being relevant from a sequential point of view (he provides an answer to the teacher's question) the wordplay he produces as an answer, by playing with the assonance between the hiatus in *Tunisia* and the suffix *-eria*, is inappropriate with respect to the activity in progress.

However, it cannot be ruled out that FIL initially grasped the potential for another answer in TEA's preceding turn, namely that he saw in the word *mainly* and its implicit meaning ('not totally', 'not only shops') a clue for hypothesizing and searching for other possible referents of words ending in *-ia* (not shops, but countries, indeed), which would lead us to consider his readiness in following a metalinguistic cue. In this view, the gesture and smile accompanying his response would, in fact, suggest that he has freely chosen to make another hypothesis; they would also function as a pre-emptive account of what he has just said (Fig. 2), as if anticipating a possible critical reply from the teacher or his classmates. Not surprisingly such a reply is immediately provided by ANN, whose comment (*but what does that have to do with it!*) is a clear judgement on the semantically non-coherent response given by her classmate. FIL, in turn, attempts a reply ('well', line 19), but is stopped by TEA (line 20) who, echoing ANN's words produces an upgrading of her critical assessment, an action that prevents FIL from replying.

At this point, FIL turns his gaze towards YO, his deskmate, with an accentuated expression of discouragement, then, with a smiling expression (Fig. 3) towards TEA, who has just called him (line 23) to begin a turn built on a reproach and, simultaneously, a solicitation to notice the reason for the incongruity of his contribution (*-eria is the same as tunisia?*). FIL lowers his gaze and smiles, while YO approaches him, also smiling (Fig. 4). As Rodgers and Fasulo (2022, p. 7), in line with other authors, recall: “for a playful frame to be established in talk, conversational participants must recognize and maintain it”. This is precisely what YO is doing, by showing his interpersonal alignment with FIL, first in a physical way, and then turning his affiliative gesture into a verbal affiliation: his turn (line 26), sequential to TEA’s one and his clear conclusion (*eh it’s not the same.*), now re-launches the wordplay (*tunesia*), by echoing his classmate’s chosen item, while transforming into one that is ‘more similar’ to those expected.

For a while, YO e FIL have exhibited the progressive construction of a mutual orientation as participants in a playful action, which leads TEA to reopen the sequence of reproach and convey a general rule of conduct, now addressed to the whole class (*let’s not blurt out the first thing that comes to mind*, line 27), closely related to the conversational relevance as an unavoidable requirement for working together.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Taking a participant-centered perspective, this study has focused on pupils’ understanding of what it means to be relevant in dialogue occurring in class. We have attempted to provide a detailed picture of some practices for achieving relevance – and related issues of coherence and topic – that pupils adopt in whole-group interactions. At the age of 8-9, children are, of course, aware of the need to *stay on topic* and *pick the right moment* to intervene in conversations with others, since they have already built up some experience in this respect, as evidenced by extensive empirical research. Moreover, at school, teachers constantly restate rules for participating in classroom discourse, thereby also supporting pupils in the progressive building of their ability to speak in a pertinent manner, a crucial component of interactional competence.

Against this backdrop, our close analysis of talk allowed us to capture some specific ways in which – as Heritage and Sorjonen (1994, p. 4) remark – “the participants display an orientation to some course of action as a coherent undertaking and as something that may be ‘departed from’ and ‘returned to’”. Following this clarification, we can first point out a point in common between the second and third example (in 4.2), which is precisely the sensitivity children show toward the action of distancing themselves from the intersubjectivity of classroom communication. In both cases, by resorting to metacommunicative turns, pupils reveal how binding the rule of being topically relevant, ie. talking about the same topic, is for them. This is demonstrated by their accounts, whether they are anticipated or postponed with respect to the informative contribution given. These accounts exhibit the children’s clear awareness of the fact that their departure from the topic at hand suspends, albeit briefly, the ongoing collective activity. Further proof of the importance they assign to the constraint of thematic relevance lies in the critical judgment immediately addressed to a classmate whose initiative is deemed inappropriate, due to its disalignment from the shared ongoing activity (in 4.3).

With regard to “returning to some course of action”, the first example (4.1) clearly demonstrates how pupils’ orientation toward the temporal organization of a discursive activity, at this school age, is not limited to the immediate local dimension, but extends to the global discourse that is carried out within a lesson (or a school day): waiting for one’s own turn in the class community does not suspend the child’s orientation towards the development of the discourse co-constructed by classmates and the teacher, rather it is on this basis that they can organize their contribution, by dividing it into a list of points and assigning them an order of priority. As evidenced by the analysis, children demonstrate they are able to monitor the sequential development of talk-in-

interaction and the contributions of their interlocutors and to employ metacommunicative resources that reflect their (meta)pragmatic competence in the interactional context in which they are engaged.

We have also seen that children maintain their orientation toward relevance in the organization of discourse even when they choose to include a playful action in it, or rather an action that gets turned into a playful one, probably generated by their ability to grasp a further hint in the teacher's explanation. Alongside the different ways in which children manage relevance and expectations towards it in classroom dialogue, they exhibit a readiness to grasp hints in the dialogue itself (as it is the case in the second example, in 4.2) and/or the associations it makes allowable (as it occurs with the personal memory triggered by an emotionally engaging story, in the third example, in 4.2), especially when free and active participation is encouraged.

In conclusion, the article provides some empirical evidence of how children aged 8-9 master interactional competences and pragmatic skills that allow them to participate in a relevant and coherent manner in classroom interactions. In doing so, the article adds to research showing how interactional competence is simultaneously a requirement and an outcome of participating in interaction. The pedagogical recognition that such evidence would require appears to be an endeavor that, in many respects, has yet to be undertaken.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that TEA does not make the purpose of the discussion explicit, which in this lesson is only introduced as a free discussion, open to interpretative comments on the scenes in the video. The purpose will be clarified in a subsequent lesson, a few days later, when the same discussion will continue in a more guided manner. It will thus become clear in retrospect how TEA is using the song to encourage the pupils to reflect on current events and the value of things, to raise their awareness of the tragedy of ongoing wars, now also through the testimony of a girl, slightly older than the pupils, who lives in a country in conflict, who laments her nostalgia for school and her classmates and who talks about a social project she has organized.

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